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Enewetak Now Declared Safe

--Enewetak, Sept. 10---The displaced people of Enewetak have been told they can return to their atoll, some as early as this year and others following completion of a multi-million dollar cleanup and rehabilitation program which must be authorized and funded by the U.S. Congress.

Some of the islands of the former nuclear test atoll will have to remain restricted from habitation and agricultural use for the time being, however, due to radioactive contamination. One island is so heavily contaminated with plutonium 239, a highly toxic radioactive isotope with a half-life of 24,000 years, that it must remain quarantined for the foreseeable future.

These were the major announcements made this weekend on Enewetak by a delegation of American military and civilian officials during a two-day meeting with more than 50 leaders of the Enewetak people. Heading the American contingent was Air Force Lt Gen Warren D. Johnson, Director of the Defense Nuclear Agency (DNA) which has been given responsibility for the cleanup of the atoll.

Stanley S. Carpenter, Director of the Department of Interior's office of territorial affairs and Peter T. Coleman, Deputy High Commissioner of the Trust Territory, represented Interior, which has responsibility for the rehabilitation program, including agricultural and building of houses. The people of Enewetak were represented by their two paramount chiefs, Iroij Joannes Peter and Iroij Binton Abraham.

The Enewetak people were relocated from their atoll to nearby, but much smaller, Ujelang in 1947, so that their atoll could be used for the testing of various nuclear devices. The population then numbered 136, but it has since grown to more than 350 and the people have for several years been pressing the government for a decision on when they could return to Enewetak.

The atoll, located in the Marshall Islands, 189 miles west of Bikini--another nuclear test site--and 1,050 miles east of Guam, was the scene of 43 nuclear tests between April, 1948 and July, 1958, including mankind's first explosion of a hydrogen bomb in November, 1952, a test which completely obliterated one island. Most of the tests took place in the northern half of the atoll, and it is there that the heaviest radioactive contamination exists.

The purpose of this weekend's meeting was to present a Draft Environmental Impact Statement, the product of more than two years' work by the Holmes and Narver Company of California and an intensive radiological survey conducted during 1972 and 1973 by the Atomic Energy Commission (AEC). The AEC tested plants, soil, fish, birds and water for radioactive contamination, finding that the amount of radioactivity varies greatly from place to place on an island as well as from island to island.

In general, the AEC found that radioactivity levels in lagoon water, fish and birds are not high enough to be harmful, but places in the northern islands of the atoll have high concentrations of radioactivity. Their report recommends that these islands not be used for living or agricultural, including the raising of farm animals. Coconut crabs, considered a delicacy throughout

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Micronesia, also should not be eaten if taken from the contaminated islands, since these animals tend to concentrate radioactivity in their bodies by consuming their own shells when they molt.

Soil samples taken from some islands also showed a sufficiently high level of radioactivity to preclude habitation, although the islands could be visited from time to time without danger.

The island of Runit, where 17 tests were conducted, is a special case. "The northern half of the island is contaminated with radioactivity and, in particular, much plutonium," as the impact statement reveals. "The United States Air Force quarantined the island in 1972 to make sure that special precautions are taken by all people who visit the island to insure their safety. No one is to visit Runit for any reason unless these precautions are taken."

"Because of the nature of the material and because so little is known about it, a team of experts would be assembled to make recommendations on what to do about it," the report continues. It goes on to propose that the plutonium-contaminated soil, along with radioactive debris from Runit and other islands, be placed in two existing nuclear craters on the island and entombed in concrete, apparently the most practical of several alternative methods of disposal for the material.

Although Runit will have to remain quarantined, the people of Enewetak were more disappointed to learn that Enjebi, one of the atoll's major islands and the traditional home island of a subdivision of the Enewetak people known as the "Dri-Enjebi" (people of Enjebi) cannot be populated at this time.

"There is some radioactivity within the atoll that at the moment we don't know how to clean up," explained Gen Johnson, "so we're going to have to ask the people of Enewetak to avoid those particular areas until we do know how to eliminate it, or until nature itself eliminates it...unfortunately, one of those islands is Enjebi...we regret this very much, and all of us tried very hard to see if our knowledge couldn't extend to the elimination of that radioactivity."

The DNA Director explained, however, that the contaminating materials of Enjebi do not include plutonium, with its long half-life, and nature itself will eliminate much of the radioactivity there in time. "It could be as long as thirty to fifty years," Gen Johnson said, adding, "I think it will be less, considerably less."

Gen Johnson and other officials were reluctant to discuss the costs of the cleanup operation, other than to say it would run "several millions of dollars." The draft environmental impact statement, however, details five possible alternatives for the cleanup, ranging from doing nothing at all--clearly an unacceptable alternative considering the desire of the people to return--through several levels of the cleanup to an expensive and scientifically questionable removal of nearly 800,000 cubic yards of contaminated soil which would be replaced by imported soil.

The third of these five alternatives is recommended in the statement. It involves the removal of only the most seriously contaminated soil--about 79,000 cubic yards--as well as all radioactivity contaminated debris, and

non-contaminated debris which is either hazardous or which poses an obstruction to use of the land for such purposes as agriculture. Radioactive scrap from all islands would be collected and entombed in one or both of the craters on Runit--named, after the tests explosion which caused them, Cactus and LaCrosse--by pumping out the water in them, lining them with concrete, filling them with a slurry of concrete made from radioactive soil and other material, and capping them with an 18-inch lid of concrete.

This is seen as preferable to either open ocean dumping or disposal of the material at one of the AEC disposal areas in the U.S., both of which would pose environmental problems and could cause a long delay in the project while the needed permits were sought, the statement explains.

Also included in the recommended alternative is rehabilitation of facilities for the project work force, facilities which would be left for the people if they desire provided they are not required by the United States.

The Impact Statement estimates the total cost of the cleanup as recommended in the third alternative at \$35,577,000 over the estimated three years of the program including field construction, base camp rehabilitation, radiological cleanup, physical cleanup, technical support, logistical support, and maintenance and operations including equipment.

The Environmental Impact Statement recommends that the people be permitted to return to the islands of Enewetak, Medren and Japtan to establish their settlements. These islands headquartered personnel and facilities during the testing period, and many buildings and other types of material remain. Buildings in good condition would be left if desired by the people, while hazardous or obstructive debris will be removed, officials explained.

Carpenter, speaking for the Interior Department, also made a major announcement during the meetings. "In accordance with a long-standing request of the people of Enewetak," he said, "we have agreed to the early return of 50 people to the island of Japtan. Our only conditions on this return are two. One, that the people involved will have to agree to abide by certain safety rules and regulations...the other is that the return will have to await the formal transfer of the atoll from the Department of Defense to the Trust Territory administration." Asked when this would be, he replied: "We would hope sometime this fall."

Some of these people might be employed in the cleanup and rehabilitation projects. Commencement of those depends on a number of factors. The people of Enewetak, assisted by their legal counsel, the Micronesian Legal Services Corporation (MLSC), have 45 days from the formal date of presentation Saturday (Sept. 7) to respond to the Draft Environmental Impact Statement.

A final version will then be prepared, and it will also be presented to and considered by the people. Only then can a decision to go ahead with the project be made, officials said. The process of seeking authorization and funding from the U.S. Congress for the project's first year has begun. Once funding is assured, and Environmental Impact Statement has been filed, and a contractor has been chosen, the project is expected to take about three years. The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers will supervise the work, it was explained.

Ted Mitchell, MLSC director, was noncommittal about his client's reactions to the statement. Meetings are continuing this week involving the Enewetak leaders, legal counsel and political leaders. Several representatives of each of the agencies involved remained behind after Gen Johnson and his party left Enewetak to answer the people's questions.

"It's going to take some time, certainly, to study and digest all that has been said and presented, decide whether it's acceptable or not, and develop some kind of written response which reflects the views of the people," Mitchell said. "The presentation has been excellent," he continued. "What pleases me more than anything else is that the United States agencies that are involved have gone to a great deal of trouble to involve the people of Enewetak in the planning up to this point, to consider things as much as possible from the point of view of the Enewetak people, and to come all this way to make a lengthy and careful presentation of all the information that bears on this important matter of returning them home. It's really, I think, an extraordinary event, not only for these people but perhaps in terms of all of Micronesia."